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ABSTRACT

The distinguishable black theatre in America, mirroring a distinguishable black experience, is an artistic product which demands audience involvement. Both the Afro-American oral tradition and the art of gesture are integral aspects of black theatre. In addition, the tragedy found black theatre is not tragedy in the classic sense, as blacks feel no commitment to an unchanging system from which they have been excluded. Thus there is a harshness evident in black plays as well as a comic-tragic mask. Six plays in particular serve as examples of similarity of deprivation, innovation of styles, and tragic harshness. These are Gordone's "No Place to Be Somebody," Le Roi Jones' (Immaru Baraka's) "Dutchman," Lorraine Hansberry's "Raisin in the Sun," Ed. Bullin's "In the Wine Time," Charles Russell's "Five on the Black Hand Side," and Lonnie Elder's "Ceremonies in Dark Old Men." (JM)

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Contemporary Black Theatre

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by

Pearl Thomas

The contemporary black theatre is concerned with art first and blackness second. Too often, we seek sociological truths in the literary and creative talents of black people. We forget the sociologists, economists and psychiatrists in the black community to whom we may go for tests and measurements of life style, ways of earning a living, and scientific statements on mental health. To the artists, we should go for art. It is inevitable and necessary that mention be made of life style and money making and mental health by the black creative artist, but his primary reason for being is still "to hold a mirror up to life."

The very fact that there is a distinguishable black theatre in America means that there is a distinguishable black experience that it mirrors. ~~Last year~~ In 1972, Charles Gordone received the Pulitzer Prize for drama and for the first time white Americans have become aware of an art form's mastery that black men have had for centuries. It is just not known, widely, that the literary tradition of the African is an oral tradition and that American blacks are Afro-Americans. It is hardly known that among the first published works on these shores by a black writer was a play, "The Escape" by William Wells Brown. Even in this early 19th century drama we find that the plot's the thing, not the historical fact of a slave's escape. American black theatre has always demanded involvement in the actions of a play, for what is happening on stage is also what is being lived by the audience, daily.

Contemporary black theatre is a fascinating mixture of opposing traditions of drama. This derives, in part, from what it owes to the African oral

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tradition; the black American play invariably tells a polemic tale. The play utilizes the Aristotalian unities, uniquely, in its contemporaneity of action. It stresses dramatic themes that are lessons in endurance to a people living in an inimical environment.

In this special mixture that unites the half dozen plays under discussion here, there are: Gordone's No Place to Be Somebody, Le Roi Jones (Immaru Baraka) Dutchman, Lorraine Hansberry's Raisin in the Sun, Ed Bullin's In the Wine Time, Charles Russell's Five on the Black Hand Side, and Lonnie Elder's Ceremonies in Dark Old Men. Aside from their similarity of derivation and the innovation of their styles, another sameness unites them. This is best characterized as their "harshness." There are no planned moments of relief from "life's stress" in these plays. They are all tragedies: even the comic-tragedies among them engender tears mixed with laughter.

We have briefly mentioned the oral tradition, and it must be said here that whatever was the manner in which it was learned by the black playwright it has become an integral aspect of his perception. Scholars will remind us that the empires of the west coast of African (geographic orgin of most black Americans) kept their histories in the oral manner. Even slavery on these shores did not completely destroy the black man's habit of passing on an occurrence by word of mouth or through a song or verbal gesture. The plays under discussion show repeated signs of this. There are plays that are not concerned with accomplishing catharsis, but rather with audience involvement in an event of the day. Once you are involved in the action of the day you learn to live with the day. To involve an audience in a lesson of survival is quite a different approach to theatre than plays that use catharsis to prove the human condition unalterable.

Western civilization has always had its theatre reiterate and perpetuate its systems. When Euripedes' women of the Trojan Women cry out in anquish against war what they end in conveying to the audience is war's horror and its inevitability in the light of power. When Shakespeare's Hamlet is borne off stage we are convinced that conscience must make us cowards. In a civilized society the thinking man must hesitate and such hesitation must destroy him. It is in the nature of things. When Ibsen's Dr. Stockman discovers pollution in the baths, the audience at An Enemy of the People learns that you do not serve the state with knowledge, you must temper what you know or you are an enemy of the people. When Willie Loman hopes to beat the system through one findal desperate sacrifice of his life in Death of a Salesman, we know that the system is not beaten for insurance clauses suit themeselves to any occasion of death. Perhaps Albee's Tiny Alice can be called one of the most symbolic reassertions of systematized humanity even when the character is a marginal dweller of the society.

For centuries, tragedy has been the meaningless sally of individuals against unchanging structures. Status quo is always maintained. Audiences weep and go on as before. It is inevitable with our backgrounds in classic wester theatre that most of us face tragedy with catharsis as an expectation. Tragedy is our culture's "safety valve." We may share with kings the downfall caused by erratic nature. Since we were never as select as kings, when they toppled our lives become bearable. We could not hope to achieve where they have failed and their failure is predestined in an ordered world, where systems prevail.

Are we then ready for a theatre that dares reject the system. The fact is that there is no tragedy in the classic sense to be found in black American plays for there is no commited belief to an unchanging system. There can never be commitment to a system from which you have been excluded and this is a strength in the morality of black tragedy. The tragedy of lack of commitment is not an easy one to present dramatically and often the premise ends in harshness. Often too, the dramatist selects the "comic-tragedy" to mask the severity of daily life. How else can the occupations of "dusting onece a week", "taking numbers," "dope peddling" be seriously considered as ways of life?

Gordone's characters are all marginal people in No Place to Be Somebody. They dare to be somebody in the no place of a bar. It is here that they come fully alive; it is here that they make sense of a senseless existence. The majority group (at first, in the role of bartender and street walker, then finally as the politician's daughter) seeks meaning in the ranks of the blacks and this group finally defeats the small, valiant group of demi-mondians. They are ironically cut down by racketeers, politicians, and police. They have had "no place" in the systematically established world, corrup as it may be; they have made their own temporary world only to be sought out in it for sustenance and destroyed by the seekers. Gordone's is a harsh play and a severe condemnation of our hypocritical society. It spares no one, and it relieves no one to indulge in conscience; rather, it catches its audience in the action and forces its participation. A viewer leaves his theatre seat anxious to avoid "Charley fever" that cancer of white values that is accompanied with a rise in temperature, if not in status.

In the six plays named here, gesturing and posturing is pronounced and they are a different and distinct dimension of understanding the action. Without expert players, most contemporary black drama would be unimpressive. This is a sign of the total interdependence of writer, actor, and audience. It is an involvement demanded by the black artist with a work of art that functions as a lesson. Gesturing is at the same time a reminder of the fact that black people are masters of the art of gesture, for as slaves deprived of a common language and forced to live with virtually no verbal communication, gesture communicated.

In whatever manner contempt for the superficialities of western values has been learned this too, like the oral-tradition necessities, is an integral aspect of the black writer's message. Just as we are available to accept any theory of how story telling, rather than story writing and recording has been acquired by black playwrights, we are open to any theory of how contempt is learned. There are those of us who would argue that the special oppressive experience of being black in white America has lead to a keener awareness of the hypocrisies of white values. It is also arguable that a neat commandment like "Thou shalt not kill" is fine for "white folks" but can hardly be appreciated by a people who have suffered generations of arbitrary lynchings. Obviously while tragedy can reside in any number of violations of existing systems that grow out of Judaic-Christian principles, like "Thou shalt not kill" it can also be derived from any number of variations of "Thou shalt kill in order to survive" with just as much validity.

In Le Roi Jones' Dutchman, we have a bitter and harshly realistic description of what is means to be killed by those who have been taught by religion not to kill and who have stablished an elaborate penal system around violations of "the law." The play tells of a white prostitute killing a black man who is a total stranger to her. She has a destructive blindness which exists in white

American society; it is the inability to conceive of a black man who is superior intellectually, morally, and spiritually to what it is believed he has been allowed to become.

The tragedy of Dutchman lies in its insistence on morality, in essence it says one kills out of blindness and must forever be haunted. The prostitute, who can be call white America has lost all concept of what her society considered moral; she is indeed at the stage of prostitution. Such prostitutes are not willing to leave their former servants out of their predicament for a part of their fall from grace has occurred because of the guilt engendered by their oppression of black humanity. Ironically and stupidly they look to him to save themselves. Ironically because blacks excluded from the white society cannot possible share its concept of "state of grace," stupidly, because it is illogical and untutored to seek meaning where you have denied knowledge and tried to foster bestiality. When the prostitute plunges her knife into the young black man whom she sought to seduce, whom she has expected to act as her scapegoat, and to grant her absolution all at the same time, we know she has killed all that she sees in herself. Dutchman, like its namesake, the phantom ship, can never rest because of murder on its decks. It sails to haunt us once more. And yet it is not total tragedy, but an inevitable lesson of life.

Ralph Ellison in a 1945 article* on Richard Wright's Blues described this kind of tragedy as belonging to the blues.

"Their attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat, but the self." In the comic-tragedies Day of Absence and Happy Ending, both by Douglas Turner Ward, we again

experience the tragic in contempt of the system. This time it is coupled with the inherent tragedy of living out the contradiction of several other Judaic-Christian principles like "Thou shall not steal, bear false witness, etc." Comedy is used here as was suggested earlier as a mask to conceal some of the harshness of base reality.

In Day of Absence, the black characters disappear one day and the white townspeople show an ineptness and desperation in continuing to live without blacks that provide for many comic episodes. The underlying tragedy is the fact that on the shoulders of the black community rest white society's entire life style. One of the most pathetically comic scenes of theplay is the white mother's inability to pacify her wailing baby. She cannot minister to its simplest needs. She can think only of getting her black maid back. Her equally inept spouse wonders, not too discreetly (and with endlessly ironic implication), why he didn't marry the servant instead of the wife.

In Happy Ending, the young black scion of a family composed of two strong working woman is our hero who complains of the menial level of jobs available to him. Both women are his aunts; one is a hairdresser and the other a domestic. In the process of complaining he takes both ladies to task for their willingness "to serve." He is also appalled by their expressions of sympathy over the death of the domestic's employer. The tragic irony of this play, much like Day of Absence, is how much the majority society depends upon its "inferior" servant class for its survival. The aunts educate their pompous young nephew to the fact that their grief is real enough, their service dedicated and necessary for the survival of

* Shadow and Act. Ellison 1945

both households. They show him how his upbringing and his education has been subsidized for years through subtle use and manipulation of the dead employer. They had even put the old man on a diet when they feared his clothing might no longer fit their nephew.

Ed Bullins writes In the Wine Time and utilizes comedy here to minimize the trafic fact of endless frustration and a menial way of life as lived by most of the play's characters. The characters may be "low-life" in occupation, but the dramatist has exaggerated the occupations through buffoonery, gesturing and posturing; all of which elevate the lives for in a very dramatic sense they have gained the dimension of humanity to amuse us, we are able to see the comic in their suffering.

In the Wine Time is a dramatic treatment of a young man's initation into the life routine of an older couple, namely his uncle and aunt. He has come to live with them when we meet him. Up to this time, he's had no apparent dwelling. The uncle has suffered the debilitating frustration of having his hopes as a returning soldier of W.W. I shattered. Now, along with a host of "low-life" characters he does little more than drink cheap wine and engage in pseudo-philosophic chatter. It is into this milieu that our yourn hero gains initation.

Ceremonies in Dark Old Men is another play that treats the subject of "low-life" living with surface comedy. This play was written by Lonnie Elder; it includes all of the elements of trafic-comedy and offers still one other dimension of contemporary black drama. This is the treatment of relationships between black men and black women. It extrapolates the role of males in what Elder calls "ceremonies." It does not voice judgment nor establish moral sanction nor censure but it does permit the audience to identify ritual.

Lorraine Hansberry's Raisin in the Sun is the only play of the group under discussion that treats middle class black American characters as accepting the irony of rejection by white middle class persons of the "nouveau" black membership and understanding this irony as one more dimension of the tragic-comic life quality. When the matriarch in Raisin in the Sun reminds her young daughter that "in my mother's house there is God" we hear the determination of an olderwomen to have the meaning of her struggle in America recognized and respected by her child who has survived because of the struggle. It is not simply an insistence on reasserting the Judaic-Christian God.

The Charles Russell play Five on the Black Hand Side is probably the least tragic of the group. The reason for this is Mr. Russell's skill at exaggerating and buffooning characters that take themselves seriously. He does this by a contrast of these serious types like the father and patriarch of the household against the meetk, amoral, and untidy types like wife and mother as well as types like the barber shop customers. Since the serious type expresses upstanding inflexible morality he can become more and more ludicrous by periodic disclosures that show his existence depends on the pragmatic juggling of the world by the meed, amoral and untidy types.

The contemporary black playwright has opened the audience to more than a viewing of a slice of life; he has demanded that we live it on the spot.

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